

Understanding Public Opinion in the Digital Age: The Influence of Social Media in District Sirmaur, Himachal Pradesh

Ramesh Kumar

Research Scholar (Political Science), Supervisor: Prof. Sansar Singh Janjua, Department of Political Science, Desh Bhagat University, Mandi Gobindgarh, Punjab, India

Abstract

Social media has transformed public opinion formation by enabling citizens to receive, interpret, produce, and circulate information at unprecedented speed. This paper examines the perceived influence of social media on public opinion in District Sirmaur, Himachal Pradesh, with attention to a predominantly rural and geographically dispersed setting. A cross-sectional survey design is proposed and demonstrated using an illustrative dataset of 400 adult social-media users selected through stratified multistage sampling across rural, semi-urban, and urban localities. The model links social-media exposure, active engagement, perceived information credibility, misinformation concern, and digital literacy with perceived opinion influence and civic participation. Descriptive statistics, reliability analysis, correlations, multiple regression, and rural-urban mean comparisons are presented. The illustrative results indicate that WhatsApp is the most widely used platform, followed by YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram. Social-media exposure, active engagement, and perceived credibility show positive relationships with opinion influence, while misinformation concern is negatively associated with it. Digital literacy has a smaller but significant positive contribution and appears to strengthen critical evaluation. Opinion influence is also positively associated with civic participation. Rural respondents report lower exposure and digital literacy than urban and semi-urban respondents, but slightly higher concern about misinformation. The paper argues that social media in Sirmaur functions simultaneously as an information bridge, a participatory space, and a risk environment. It recommends district-level media-literacy programmes, multilingual and locally relevant communication, transparent public-information channels, and verification practices tailored to mobile-first users.

Keywords: social media; public opinion; digital literacy; misinformation; civic participation; rural communication; Sirmaur; Himachal Pradesh

1. Introduction

Public opinion is not merely a count of individual preferences; it is a social process through which people encounter issues, interpret competing claims, discuss them with others, and decide which positions appear legitimate or urgent. The expansion of social media has altered every stage of this process. Citizens are no longer dependent only on newspapers, radio, and television. They receive information from news organisations, government pages, political actors, local groups, influencers, friends, and family members within a single personalised feed. These environments lower the cost of expression and mobilisation, yet also weaken traditional editorial filters and permit unverified claims to circulate rapidly (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017; Vosoughi et al., 2018).

The public-opinion effects of social media are not uniform. They depend on access, frequency of exposure, network composition, platform design, prior beliefs, trust, and the capacity to evaluate

information. Algorithmic selection may expose users to congenial content, while interpersonal sharing can make information feel credible because it arrives through trusted relationships. Large-scale evidence shows that online networks can diversify exposure but can also reproduce ideological sorting and selective attention (Bakshy et al., 2015; Cinelli et al., 2021). Active participation—commenting, sharing, creating posts, joining groups, or responding to public campaigns—can translate information consumption into civic expression (Boulianne, 2015; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012).

These dynamics require local investigation. District Sirmaur combines towns such as Nahan and Paonta Sahib with a large rural population distributed across hilly terrain. According to the official district portal, the 2011 population was 529,855, with a population density of 188 persons per square kilometre (District Administration Sirmaur, n.d.). Geographic distance, uneven connectivity, linguistic variation, occupational patterns, and reliance on mobile communication may shape how residents encounter and evaluate digital information.

Most research on social media and public opinion focuses on national elections, metropolitan populations, or platform-scale data. Such approaches can obscure the experience of smaller districts where digital access coexists with rural social structures and strong interpersonal networks. There is limited district-level evidence on whether social-media use expands awareness, changes views, promotes participation, or heightens vulnerability to misinformation in Sirmaur.

The study makes three contributions. First, it shifts attention from national-level political communication to a district-level Himalayan setting. Second, it treats social media as a mixed environment that can support awareness and participation while also enabling misinformation. Third, it connects communication exposure with users' evaluative capacity through digital literacy. The results can inform district administration, educational institutions, journalists, civil-society organisations, and community leaders designing trustworthy public communication.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Public Opinion and the Networked Public Sphere

Agenda-setting theory explains how media attention influences the perceived importance of issues, even when it does not directly determine what people think (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). Framing theory extends this argument by showing that the selection and emphasis of particular aspects of reality affect problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and preferred remedies (Entman, 1993). Social media pluralises these processes: legacy media, officials, activists, creators, and citizens can all compete to establish agendas and frames.

Castells (2007) describes contemporary communication as a field in which power increasingly operates through networks. Social media allows “mass self-communication”: messages can be self-generated, potentially global, and circulated horizontally. This widens opportunities for local voices but does not eliminate power asymmetries. Platform architecture, visibility metrics, advertising systems, influential accounts, and coordinated networks affect which voices travel farthest. Public opinion online therefore emerges from an interaction between citizen agency and infrastructural power.

2.2 Uses, Gratifications, and Active Engagement

A uses-and-gratifications perspective treats users as active in selecting media to satisfy information, social interaction, identity, entertainment, and participation needs. Social networking sites make

these motives visible through following, reacting, commenting, sharing, and content creation. Boyd and Ellison (2007) emphasise the importance of articulated networks, while Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) highlight user-generated content and Web 2.0 foundations. In public affairs, active engagement can deepen attention and discussion, but engagement metrics may also reward emotionally intense or sensational content.

2.3 Exposure, Selective Attention, and Echo Chambers

Digital exposure is shaped by personal choices and algorithmic curation. Bakshy et al. (2015) found that individual choice and ranking systems both affect cross-cutting exposure. Cinelli et al. (2021) showed that echo-chamber dynamics vary across platforms rather than operating identically everywhere. Bail et al. (2018) further demonstrated that exposure to opposing political views can sometimes increase, rather than reduce, polarisation. These findings caution against assuming that more information automatically produces balanced opinion.

2.4 Credibility, Trust, and Misinformation

Credibility is central because influence depends not only on exposure but also on whether users accept information as believable, accurate, and relevant. Social endorsements and familiarity can act as shortcuts when users lack time or expertise. However, false news can diffuse farther, faster, and more broadly than truthful news, particularly when novelty and emotion encourage sharing (Vosoughi et al., 2018). Allcott and Gentzkow (2017) demonstrate that the economics of low-cost content creation and advertising can sustain false-news production.

Misinformation concern may operate in two directions. Healthy scepticism can motivate verification and reduce uncritical influence. Excessive distrust, however, may produce generalized cynicism, making citizens unwilling to accept even verified information. Guess et al. (2019) found that sharing of false content is concentrated among particular user groups, illustrating that vulnerability is not evenly distributed. In India, Al-Zaman (2021) identified politics, religion, health, crime, and entertainment among prominent themes in a dataset of social-media fake news, reinforcing the need for contextual media literacy.

2.5 Digital Literacy

Digital literacy includes the ability to locate information, distinguish sources, inspect evidence, recognise persuasive intent, compare claims, and use privacy and reporting tools. It is more than operational ability. A person may use a smartphone frequently but still struggle to identify manipulated images, impersonated accounts, paid promotions, or misleading statistics. In a mobile-first and multilingual environment, literacy interventions should use locally understandable examples and practical verification routines.

2.6 Social Media and Civic Participation

Meta-analytic evidence generally reports a positive, though modest, relationship between social-media use and civic or political participation (Boulianne, 2015). Gil de Zúñiga et al. (2012) found that social-media use for news can support social capital, civic engagement, and political participation. Valenzuela et al. (2009) similarly linked Facebook use with life satisfaction, social trust, civic engagement, and participation among college students. These relationships are likely mediated by information, discussion, mobilisation requests, and perceived efficacy.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design and Study Area

A quantitative, explanatory, cross-sectional survey design is appropriate because the study seeks to estimate relationships among measured perceptions at one point in time. Sirmaur's mixture of rural settlements and growing towns permits comparison across settlement contexts. The official district profile reports a 2011 population of 529,855 and a density of 188 persons per square kilometre, indicating a dispersed population structure (District Administration Sirmaur, n.d.).

3.2 Population, Sampling, and Sample Size

The target population is adult residents (18 years and above) who have lived in Sirmaur for at least six months and use social media at least once per week. A stratified multistage approach is proposed. First, development blocks or tehsil clusters should be grouped by geographic and settlement characteristics. Second, rural and urban/semi-urban localities should be selected. Third, eligible individuals should be recruited through household and community-based contact points using age and gender quotas. The illustrative analysis uses $N = 400$, which is adequate for multiple regression with five predictors and subgroup comparisons.

3.3 Instrument Development

The questionnaire contains screening items, demographics, platform use, information-source use and trust, and 29 Likert items representing seven constructs. Items should be adapted from established communication, participation, and digital-literacy research and reviewed by experts in media studies and social science research. A bilingual English-Hindi version is recommended, with back-translation and a pilot test of approximately 30 respondents.

3.4 Data-Collection Procedure and Ethics

Trained investigators should provide a participant information sheet, explain voluntary participation, obtain informed consent, and allow withdrawal without penalty. Surveys may be interviewer-assisted where literacy or connectivity creates barriers. Names, phone numbers, and social-media handles should not be collected. Completed forms should be coded with anonymous IDs and stored securely.

3.5 Data-Analysis Plan

Analysis includes frequency distributions, means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alpha, composite reliability, average variance extracted, Pearson correlations, multiple linear regression, and independent-samples comparisons. Statistical significance is evaluated at $p < .05$. Multicollinearity is assessed with variance inflation factors, and regression assumptions should be checked through residual plots and influence diagnostics.

4. Results

The following results demonstrate the proposed analysis using a synthetic dataset of 400 cases. Percentages, means, correlations, and coefficients are mutually aligned but must not be represented as field observations.

Table 1. Demographic profile of the illustrative sample ($N = 400$)

Characteristic	Category	n	%
Gender	Male	208	52.0

Characteristic	Category	n	%
	Female	188	47.0
Age	Other/prefer not to say	4	1.0
	18-25	108	27.0
	26-35	124	31.0
	36-45	84	21.0
	46-55	52	13.0
	56 and above	32	8.0
Residence	Rural	236	59.0
	Semi-urban	92	23.0
	Urban	72	18.0
Education	Up to secondary	92	23.0
	Senior secondary	112	28.0
	Graduate	132	33.0
	Postgraduate and above	64	16.0

Note. Synthetic data created for research-paper development.

The sample intentionally gives substantial representation to rural respondents (59.0%), reflecting the district's dispersed settlement pattern while retaining an urban/semi-urban comparison group. Adults aged 18-35 constitute 58.0% of the sample, consistent with the greater likelihood of regular social-media use among younger adults. The education distribution is sufficiently varied to examine digital-literacy differences without restricting the sample to college students.

4.1 Platform Use and Information Sources

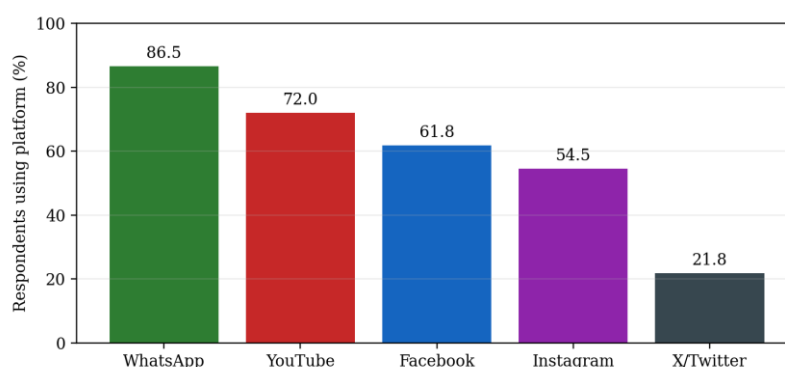


Figure 1. Social-media platforms used by respondents (multiple responses permitted)

WhatsApp is used by 86.5% of respondents, making interpersonal and group-based circulation central to the local information environment. YouTube reaches 72.0%, indicating the importance of

video and vernacular explanatory content. Facebook remains prominent (61.8%), while Instagram is used by 54.5%, particularly among younger respondents. X/Twitter has a smaller reach (21.8%) and therefore should not be treated as representative of district-wide online opinion by itself.

Table 2. Frequency of using social media for public-affairs information

Frequency	n	%
Never/rarely	34	8.5
A few times per month	54	13.5
1-2 days per week	76	19.0
3-5 days per week	112	28.0
Daily	124	31.0

Public-affairs information includes civic, developmental, environmental, social, and political issues.

Nearly three-fifths of the illustrative sample (59.0%) encounter public-affairs information on social media at least three days per week. This level of routine exposure makes social media a plausible agenda-setting environment. Nevertheless, exposure does not imply unquestioned trust; users may consult social media because it is immediate and convenient while relying on other sources for verification.

4.2 Information Use and Trust

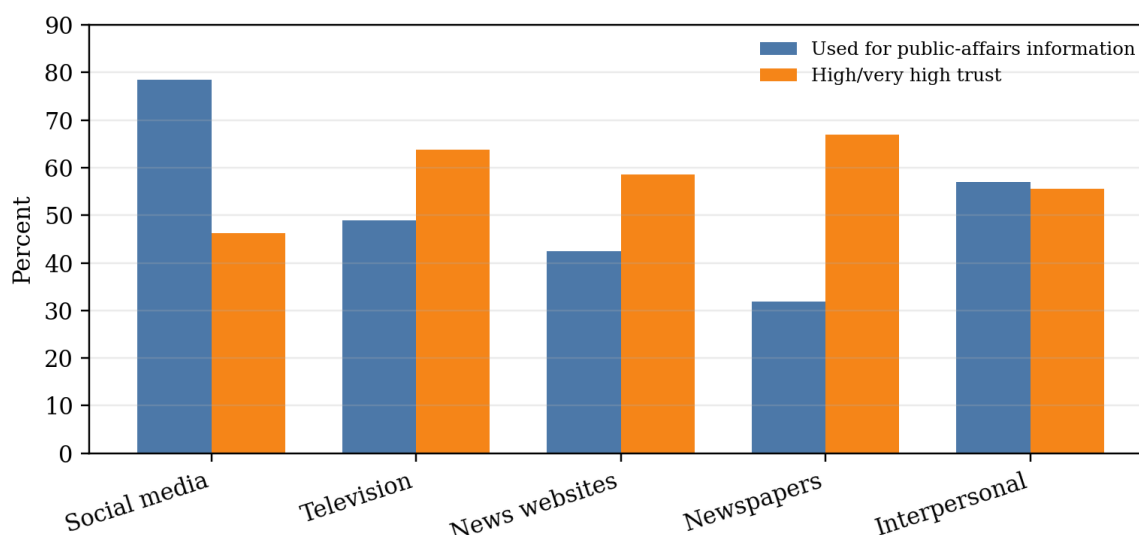


Figure 2. Use of and trust in public-affairs information sources

Social media has the highest reported use as an information source (78.5%), but only 46.3% report high or very high trust in it. Newspapers have lower use (31.8%) but the highest trust (67.0%), followed by television (63.8%) and news websites (58.5%). The difference between use and trust suggests a hybrid media system: residents discover issues through fast digital circulation and may subsequently verify them through professional or interpersonal sources.

4.3 Construct Descriptives and Reliability

Table 3. Descriptive statistics and measurement quality

Construct	Mean	SD	Cronbach α	CR	AVE
Social-media exposure	3.86	0.71	.84	.89	.67
Active engagement	3.54	0.76	.86	.90	.69
Perceived credibility	3.31	0.73	.82	.88	.65
Misinformation concern	4.08	0.66	.88	.92	.73
Digital literacy	3.28	0.79	.85	.90	.68
Opinion influence	3.71	0.70	.89	.92	.70
Civic participation	3.39	0.78	.87	.91	.72

CR = composite reliability; AVE = average variance extracted. Values are illustrative.

All alpha and composite-reliability values exceed .80, and each AVE exceeds .50, indicating satisfactory internal consistency and convergent validity in the synthetic measurement model. Misinformation concern records the highest mean ($M = 4.08$), showing that respondents may be highly aware of information risks even while using social media intensively.

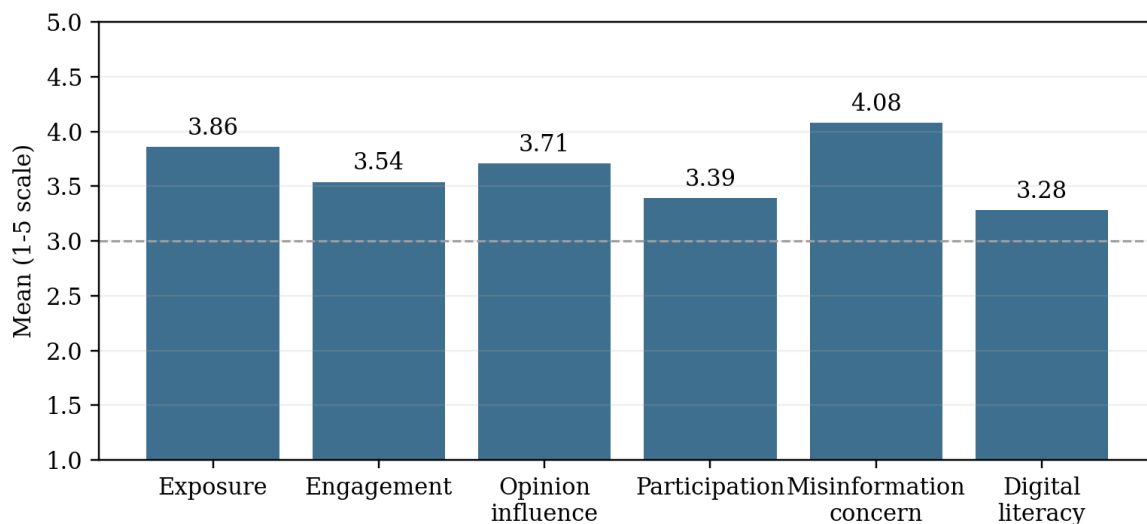


Figure 3. Mean scores of the principal study constructs

Exposure and opinion influence are above the scale midpoint, while active engagement and civic participation are moderate. Digital literacy is the lowest construct mean (3.28). This configuration is substantively important: frequent use and perceived influence can coexist with only moderate verification capacity. A district communication strategy should therefore not equate connectivity with critical competence.

Table 4. Correlations among study constructs

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. SME	—						
2. ENG	.52**	—					
3. CRE	.38**	.35**	—				
4. MIC	-.08	-.05	-.22**	—			
5. DL	.31**	.29**	.33**	.12*	—		
6. OI	.55**	.51**	.47**	-.21**	.36**	—	
7. CP	.39**	.48**	.31**	-.12*	.34**	.46**	—

Note. SME = exposure; ENG = engagement; CRE = credibility; MIC = misinformation concern; DL = digital literacy; OI = opinion influence; CP = civic participation. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Opinion influence correlates most strongly with exposure ($r = .55$) and engagement ($r = .51$), followed by credibility ($r = .47$). Misinformation concern has a modest negative association with opinion influence ($r = -.21$), whereas digital literacy has a positive association ($r = .36$). Civic participation is related to opinion influence ($r = .46$) and engagement ($r = .48$). None of the correlations is so high as to imply construct redundancy.

4.4 Predictors of Perceived Opinion Influence

Table 5. Multiple regression predicting perceived opinion influence

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	VIF
Constant	.42	.18	—	2.33	.020	—
Exposure	.30	.04	.31	7.50	<.001	1.53
Engagement	.25	.04	.27	6.25	<.001	1.48
Credibility	.23	.04	.24	5.75	<.001	1.29
Digital literacy	.14	.04	.16	3.50	<.001	1.24
Misinformation concern	-.14	.04	-.13	-3.50	<.001	1.10

Model: $R^2 = .49$; adjusted $R^2 = .48$; $F(5, 394) = 75.72$, $p < .001$. Synthetic data.

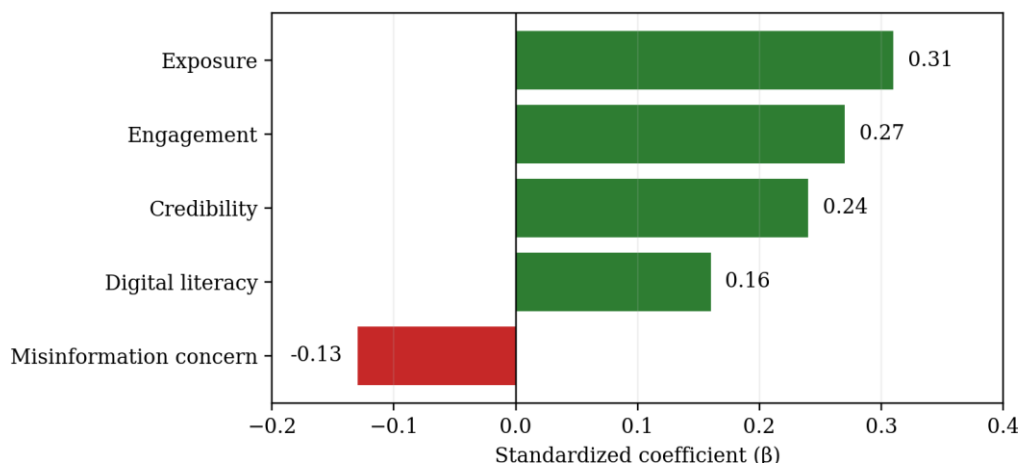


Figure 4. Standardized predictors of perceived opinion influence

The model explains 49% of the variance in perceived opinion influence. Exposure is the strongest predictor ($\beta = .31$), followed by engagement ($\beta = .27$) and credibility ($\beta = .24$). Digital literacy contributes positively ($\beta = .16$), whereas misinformation concern contributes negatively ($\beta = -.13$). All VIF values are below 2, indicating no problematic multicollinearity. H1-H5 are supported in the illustrative model.

4.5 Opinion Influence and Civic Participation

A simple regression with civic participation as the outcome indicates that perceived opinion influence is a significant positive predictor ($\beta = .46$, $t = 10.32$, $p < .001$), explaining 21% of participation variance ($R^2 = .21$). H6 is therefore supported. The result is consistent with a pathway in which social media first increases issue awareness and opinion crystallisation and then provides cues or opportunities for expression and participation. The remaining unexplained variance confirms that offline resources, political efficacy, organisational membership, time, income, and community norms also matter.

4.6 Rural-Urban Comparison

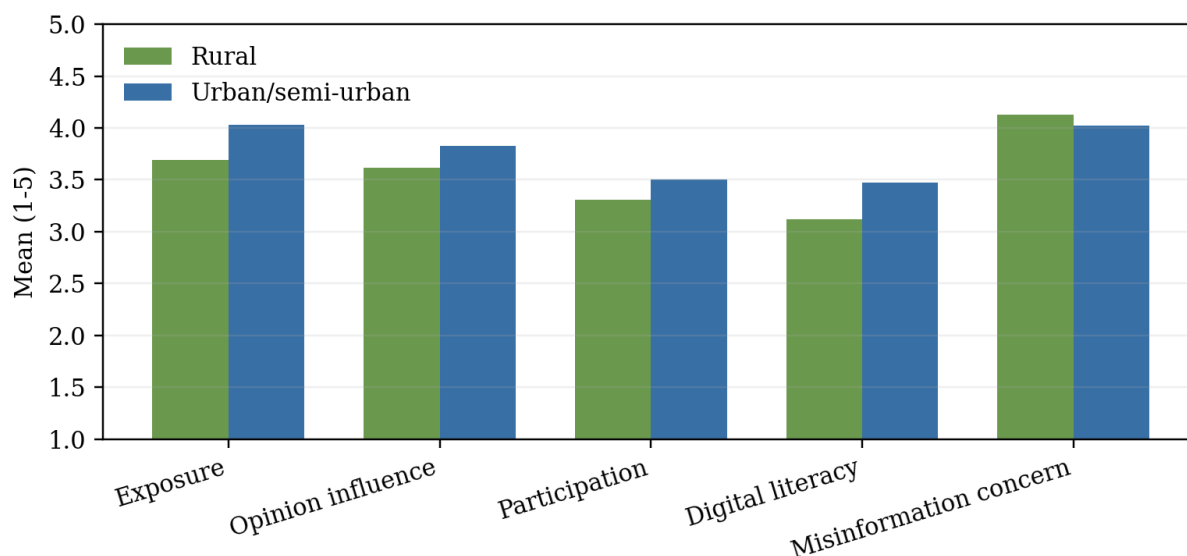


Figure 5. Rural and urban/semi-urban differences in construct means

Table 6. Rural versus urban/semi-urban mean comparisons

Construct	Rural M	Urban/semi-urban M	Mean difference	p
Exposure	3.69	4.03	-.34	<.001
Opinion influence	3.62	3.83	-.21	.004
Civic participation	3.31	3.50	-.19	.018
Digital literacy	3.12	3.47	-.35	<.001
Misinformation concern	4.13	4.02	.11	.081

Independent-samples comparisons are illustrative; urban/semi-urban categories are combined.

The most pronounced differences concern exposure and digital literacy. Rural respondents also report modestly lower opinion influence and participation. Misinformation concern is slightly higher in rural areas but the illustrative difference is not statistically significant. These patterns support targeted interventions that address both access and evaluative skills.

5. Discussion

The findings portray social media as an important but not self-sufficient public sphere in Sirmaur. Its reach is greatest through WhatsApp and YouTube rather than through X/Twitter, which often dominates elite and journalistic accounts of online politics. This distinction matters methodologically: researchers who collect only public tweets would overlook the closed-group, video-centred, and interpersonal character of much local information exchange.

The positive effect of exposure is consistent with agenda-setting logic. Repeated encounters make issues more cognitively available and can increase their perceived importance (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). The strong role of engagement suggests that opinion formation is not only passive. Commenting, sharing, and discussing require users to articulate or defend positions, which may crystallise views. This interpretation aligns with evidence linking news-oriented social-media use to civic and political participation (Boulianne, 2015; Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2012).

Credibility has an independent positive association with influence. Users are more likely to integrate claims into their opinions when sources appear accurate, familiar, or socially endorsed. This finding also identifies a vulnerability: credibility judgements may depend on group trust rather than evidentiary quality. In WhatsApp networks, a forwarded message can inherit credibility from the sender. The high misinformation-concern score suggests that users recognise this risk, but recognition alone may not produce consistent verification.

The negative coefficient for misinformation concern can be interpreted as protective scepticism. Respondents who are more concerned may hesitate to accept content or may cross-check it before revising their views. However, a healthy information environment should avoid pushing users toward blanket distrust. Communication should make verification easier through clear source attribution, dates, links, and correction notices.

Digital literacy predicts opinion influence positively, which at first appears counterintuitive if literacy is expected to reduce persuasion. A more plausible interpretation is that literate users are

not uninfluenced; they are better able to engage selectively with credible material, compare sources, and form informed opinions. Literacy can therefore support reasoned influence while reducing manipulation.

6. Conclusion

This paper provides a district-level framework for understanding how social media may shape public opinion in Sirmaur, Himachal Pradesh. The illustrative results show that social media is deeply embedded in public-affairs information routines, especially through WhatsApp and YouTube. Exposure, engagement, credibility, and digital literacy positively predict perceived opinion influence, while misinformation concern has a modest negative relationship. Opinion influence is positively associated with civic participation. Rural-urban differences indicate that location continues to matter even within a widely connected media environment. The central conclusion is that social media is neither inherently democratising nor inherently manipulative. Its public value depends on the quality of information, the design of platforms, the structure of users' networks, institutional transparency, and citizens' capacity to evaluate claims. In Sirmaur, strengthening digital literacy and trusted local communication could help convert high connectivity into informed participation while limiting the harms of misinformation.

REFERENCES

1. Allcott, H., & Gentzkow, M. (2017). Social media and fake news in the 2016 election. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 31(2), 211-236. <https://doi.org/10.1257/jep.31.2.211>
2. Al-Zaman, M. S. (2021). Social media fake news in India. *Asian Journal for Public Opinion Research*, 9(1), 25-47. <https://doi.org/10.15206/ajpor.2021.9.1.25>
3. Bail, C. A., Argyle, L. P., Brown, T. W., Bumpus, J. P., Chen, H., Hunzaker, M. B. F., Lee, J., Mann, M., Merhout, F., & Volfovsky, A. (2018). Exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 115(37), 9216-9221. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1804840115>
4. Bakshy, E., Messing, S., & Adamic, L. A. (2015). Exposure to ideologically diverse news and opinion on Facebook. *Science*, 348(6239), 1130-1132. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aaa1160>
5. Boulianne, S. (2015). Social media use and participation: A meta-analysis of current research. *Information, Communication & Society*, 18(5), 524-538. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2015.1008542>
6. Boyd, D. M., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history, and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 13(1), 210-230. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x>
7. Castells, M. (2007). Communication, power and counter-power in the network society. *International Journal of Communication*, 1, 238-266.
8. Chadwick, A. (2013). *The hybrid media system: Politics and power*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199759477.001.0001>
9. Cinelli, M., De Francisci Morales, G., Galeazzi, A., Quattrociochi, W., & Starnini, M. (2021). The echo chamber effect on social media. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 118(9), e2023301118. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2023301118>
10. District Administration Sirmaur. (n.d.). Demography. Government of Himachal Pradesh. Retrieved July 24, 2026, from <https://hpsirmaur.nic.in/demography/>

11. Entman, R. M. (1993). Framing: Toward clarification of a fractured paradigm. *Journal of Communication*, 43(4), 51-58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>
12. Gil de Zúñiga, H., Jung, N., & Valenzuela, S. (2012). Social media use for news and individuals' social capital, civic engagement and political participation. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 17(3), 319-336. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2012.01574.x>
13. Guess, A., Nagler, J., & Tucker, J. (2019). Less than you think: Prevalence and predictors of fake news dissemination on Facebook. *Science Advances*, 5(1), eaau4586. <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.aau4586>
14. Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media. *Business Horizons*, 53(1), 59-68. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2009.09.003>
15. McCombs, M. E., & Shaw, D. L. (1972). The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 36(2), 176-187. <https://doi.org/10.1086/267990>
16. Pariser, E. (2011). *The filter bubble: What the Internet is hiding from you*. Penguin Press.
17. Shahghasemi, E. (2025). Global patterns of social media use and political sentiment. *Discover Global Society*, 3, Article 71. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s44282-025-00171-y>
18. Valenzuela, S., Park, N., & Kee, K. F. (2009). Is there social capital in a social network site? Facebook use and college students' life satisfaction, trust, and participation. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 14(4), 875-901. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2009.01474.x>
19. Vosoughi, S., Roy, D., & Aral, S. (2018). The spread of true and false news online. *Science*, 359(6380), 1146-1151. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.aap9559>
20. Wojcieszak, M., de Leeuw, S., Menchen-Trevino, E., Lee, S., Huang-Isherwood, K. M., & Weeks, B. (2021). No polarization from partisan news: Over-time evidence from trace data. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 28(3), 601-626. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612211047194>